

Temporal Displacement

by

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A Statement in Support of Project in Lieu of Thesis Exhibition Submitted to

the Faculty of

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This Statement in Support of Project in Lieu of Thesis Exhibition was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Professor Michaela DiCosola, Department of Visual Arts and Art History, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Abstract

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Temporal Displacement is an investigation of loss and the recollection of memories translated through tangible objects and their placement in relationship to one another. The objects are primarily slip-cast terracotta ceramic dog-like heads with fabric bodies crafted as puppet-like forms, which are both stationary and suspended. Additional elements include a Mechanical Dog that the viewer activates with a hand-held crank; muslin fabric printed with hand-made ceramic stamps, and a curtain. The ceramic stamps are incised with a version of the puppets playing the game of jacks. The installation is within a three-walled room that invites viewers into a liminal time-space and experience, then leads them out again.

Temporal Displacement

List of Figures	vii
List of Plates	viii
Introduction.....	1
Installation.....	1
Background.....	5
Process, Methods and Materials	8
Puppets as Objects	8
Investigations and Influences.....	12
Conclusion	27
Figures.....	21
Plates	23
Notes	28
Bibliography	28

List of Figures

Figure 1. 348 West 22nd Street, Do Ho Suh, 2011-2015.	21
Figure 2. Smoke 2, Holy Smoke, 2018.....	21
Figure 3. White Rabbit, Billie Grace Lynn, 2010.....	22

List of Plates

Plate 1. Inked ceramic stamp, 2019-2020.....	23
Plate 2. Juicer, terracotta, paper, ink, cart, dimensions variable, 2018.....	23
Plate 3. Temporal Displacement, Installation view, mixed media, 2020	25
Plate 4. Temporal Displacement, Installation view, mixed media, 2020	26
Plate 5. Temporal Displacement, Detail, mixed media, 2020	27

Introduction

Temporal Displacement is an investigation of loss, memory and grief translated through the creation of tangible objects, their placement in relationship to one another, and the story they tell. The viewer is invited to enter a different time-space through the activation of a Mechanical Dog. Once transported, the viewer encounters suspended and standing hand puppets, experiences the puppets' grief and loss, then exits through a hanging curtain, thus witnessing a moment in time. The project's genesis was a group of sketches depicting several months spent with my older sister, when we were both in our early 20s and she was battling cancer. One summer we lived in Peoria, Ill., and adhered to a natural foods diet while Susan underwent chemotherapy. During this period an adopted puppy that we named Blue transformed the difficult experience into a time containing happiness and possibility. The dog, Blue, became the seed of my investigation.

Installation

Following my impulse to translate people, events, ideas and memories into animal forms, this project contains a number of hand-crafted dog-headed puppets, which are about 20 inches high, with terracotta heads and cloth bodies. They are both suspended and free-standing, and are designed to convey the sadness and poignancy of lost time, lost people, and the final parting from my sister. The suspended puppets speak of departed spirits and time, while the standing puppets convey the emotional experience of separation. These puppets, with their inert autonomy, evoke something not alive, yet filled with potential, mirroring memories of the past and experienced in the present. Visitors are to grasp the sense of poignant sadness leavened with play that form the core of my layered memories of that summer. Other elements include an interactive Mechanical Dog and fabric printed with hand-crafted ceramic stamps that depict puppets playing jacks. The puppets' clothing is crafted from this printed muslin fabric, which is also used as cloth for a curtain. Lighting is strategically utilized to create shadows of the puppets on the wall. Shadows heighten the dramatic effect and reinforce the gestural and theatrical elements of the puppets. The lighting underscores the emotional state of the puppets and creates a sense of mysticism.

The exhibit is contained primarily within a 12-foot long, 8-foot wide room within the gallery that is open on one of its long sides. It is painted a soft, neutral, gray-tinged white to invite the viewer into a different time-space continuum with faded memories.

The Mechanical Dog, attached to the outside of the first 8-foot long wall, is the first element that the visitor encounters. Its frame is 6-feet high and slightly larger than 2-feet wide. Masonite is used to craft both the frame and the Dog, which, when activated, moves up and down on its hind legs with its paws in the air. A hand-crank invites the visitor to activate the Dog, which is designed to usher the visitor into the room's interior. The Dog functions as a portal and a mechanism to transport the viewer into a separate time-space experience. A silhouette of the Dog – the same size as the Dog itself and painted a lighter off-white – is on the side of the entrance wall and guides visitors past the doorway into the interior. This silhouette repeats twice inside the room, encouraging the visitor to move through the space.

Moving into the room proper, the viewer comprehends the internal relationship in the puppets' arrangements vis-à-vis one another and with the viewer and the room's other elements. First one encounters a group of puppets set on three pedestals together with three suspended puppets. Next, a puppet holding its arms up perched on an elliptical-shaped muslin-covered pedestal greets visitors. The viewer then sees the back of a puppet that is bent over, seemingly in pain, standing on a round, muslin-covered pedestal. Moving around to see the front of this figure, the viewer then observes a prone puppet, on a half-circle, muslin-covered platform, with another puppet peering out from the side. All of the standing puppets are clothed in tea-colored muslin, printed from hand-crafted ceramic stamps. These stamps show the puppets' portraits, as well as the two puppets playing the game of jacks. The three suspended puppets are clothed in an oatmeal-colored cotton fabric, also stamped with hand-crafted ceramic stamps. These ethereal

puppets represent the spirits of departed puppets. They reference angels and spiritual beings.

Lastly, one encounters a stamp-printed curtain made from the same fabric as the puppet bodies and the pedestals. It is a portal that leads visitors out of the altered reality, to reenter their own time-space.

Background

Always haunted by my sister's death, I was 16 when Susan, 18, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the white blood cells. Initial treatment led to remission. The cancer returned, however, when I was a sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College, in Bronxville, N.Y. We spent the following summer in Peoria, Ill., where my mother was pursuing a course of study, and Susan's physician was willing to prescribe high-potency vitamins as part of a natural foods diet (the Gerson Therapy diet). We believed this would help her recovery as she continued with chemotherapy (which she hated and didn't believe was helping her). We rented a small two-bedroom, wooden-frame house. I can't recall that we ever saw our mother – or our father for that matter – the entire summer.

Not only sisters, we were also close friends. Chemotherapy was hard on Susan. Watching her suffer was difficult. When we adopted a beautiful puppy we named Blue, warmth, joy and normality returned to our world. It became a time out-of-time that in retrospect left a sense of both connection and grief. It was the last time I, and maybe Susan, felt things might go either way. Though it wasn't the last time she tried to get well, I don't think we were ever as hopeful as we were that summer. She died several years later. This summer time-span became a non-linear magical pause. The title of my work "Temporal Displacement" references a state that is outside 'normal' time, both in the initial experience and the transformed memory.

Blue is the key to that time and experience. She was an Australian shepherd-German shepherd mix. She came to us at 4 months old. We had actually seen her the day we moved in – she was with the young man who represented the family that owned the home. A week later she became ours, when his mother wouldn't let him keep her. She had one blue eye and one brown eye, so we called her Blue. Interestingly, Susan had brown eyes, and I have blue eyes. We loved her immediately, and she loved us. She represented happiness and fun and lightened our atmosphere, transforming our time, and lifting our focus from the shadow cast by Susan's illness. Blue gave us a way to escape the reality of events.

Blue put our situation into perspective, too. The Gerson diet was a strict vegan regimen that included high-dose vitamins, juicing (with an emphasis on carrots using a grinder and press to preserve the vitamins), and calves' liver juice.¹ We made liver juice twice. Susan drank it the first time (though I followed all the other Gerson edicts, I drew the line at liver juice). The second time we made it, we were cutting carrots to put in the liver juice (as if anything could help) and not watching Blue. In a split second, she jumped up on the table and consumed an enormous slab of raw liver. We thought that was hilarious. Blue lay contentedly on her side for the rest of the afternoon. That was the end of making liver juice! Decades later, the image of Blue leaping for the liver was translated into graphite and paper sketches.

That summer is most associated with the entire seven-year experience of Susan's illness and death. About 10 years ago, when crafting a book as an undergraduate assignment, a separate graphic novel centering on that summer began to take shape. It formed the basis of what eventually became the installation. Blue became the nexus of

the story, as does the Dog in the present exhibition, Temporal Displacement. The Mechanical Dog has become an iteration of Blue; not the dog herself, yet representative of the transformational nature she played in our lives. In this way the very action of cranking the Mechanical Dog activates the metaphor.

My impulse has always been to transform visually ideas, emotions, thoughts and events into creatures. The dog-headed puppets reference this, as the puppets are symbols of my response to these events. The stuffed animal bodies reference childhood, and the bond Susan and I shared from our earliest days, and they are meant to embody both love and grief, two sides of this experience.

Process, Methods and Materials

While this installation contains a variety of materials, its central element is ceramic, and its background is the ceramic medium. I switched my focus from drawing and painting to ceramics during undergraduate schooling at Florida International University. I was captivated by the medium's immediacy, how it recalls the hands that knead it, a visible vehicle of memory. There is a haptic mind-body connection. Since the experience of drawing on 6-foot long paper, I have been fascinated by what I call 'the intelligence of the body' -- how working with objects by hand influences thoughts and feelings and generates ideas.² The deeply physical nature of working with clay intensifies this process. Clay also has a connection with artifact. Many memories of our shared human past are made from terracotta clay, such as the prehistoric Tuc d'Audoubert bison in France.³

During my first year at Florida Atlantic University I revisited the sketches of the visual memories of the summer Susan and I shared. It was suggested that I put aside other investigations and look further and deeper into the significance of those memories. From that, I developed my first group of ceramic stamps, representing Susan, Blue and myself. One of the most successful stamps portrayed the hand-made juicing machine crafted by our stepfather, Lee Manna, who was an engineer. Based on that, I created a three-dimensional terracotta representation of the device at a significantly larger scale than the original along with ceramic carrots and cups. The vessel was quite literally a

transformational object, and it led directly to other ways of envisioning a transformational metaphor, which culminated in the Mechanical Dog.

When displaying the vessel (Plate 1) it became necessary to suspend several elements. This, in turn, led to further investigation in meaning. The act of suspension itself became a portal, a metaphoric pathway, opening up ways of experiencing, which are not earth-bound, nor time-bound. Suspension also became a metaphor for the magical, alembic aspect of the device that I had been seeking. I began experimenting with mobiles, then marionettes, from which the idea of the puppet began to emerge. An in-person discussion with sculptor Billie Grace Lynn in 2018 gave me insight into the childhood associations that toy-like and puppet-like visual elements can elicit in viewers (Fig. 1). These can encompass “cute” associations that might undermine the artist’s intentions, as well as recollection of toys and stuffed animals associated with various stages of childhood.

The slip-casting technique was used for its capacity to replicate multiples, though, in trimming, casting and the alteration of excess cast lines, as well as paddling, some slight differences emerged. I wanted heads that would not compete with one another for attention, while the bodies did the communicating through gesture. Bodily gestures can be used to display emotion, not only in dance but in inanimate objects, underscoring the distress I want the viewer to apprehend. Further refinement emerged after a conversation with Associate Professor Clarence Brooks of the FAU Department of Theatre and Dance, on Jan 22, 2020, resulting in changes in the bodily positions of the puppets. For example, research led to the crouched gesture, which could imply “a punch in the gut.”

Size was another consideration. When seeking the correct scale for the puppets, I first crafted two smaller slip-cast heads, creating four plaster molds, two for each size.

Upon assessment, both earlier sizes appeared precious or doll-like; therefore, the larger roughly 20-inch high size emerged -- visually and physically too large to be a comfortable hand puppet, yet just on the edge of manipulation. For the printed cloth of the hand puppet bodies, I selected a tone-on-tone scheme, in order to create a somewhat ghostly effect. All the bodies are sewn from muslin of several weaves and textures. This combination picks up printed colors well; it is simple, unsophisticated, and does not detract from gesture. White Speedball Supergraphic ink was used, in order to reference spirits and wraiths.

The ceramic printing stamps have their genesis in a process that began in undergraduate school with the creation of a 'Mouse Alphabet.' Each 4-inch-by-4-inch ceramic 'letter' was a mouse form with a separate gesture. Incising clay allows a more fluid and drawing-like result as compared to wood or linoleum blocks. Four stamps have been crafted for this installation: two are 14-inch high portraits of puppets. Two larger stamps, 16 inches and 20 inches in diameter respectively, depict those same puppets playing jacks, the game that Susan and I played with each other. Jacks speak to the idea of Chance, and become a metaphorical element within the experience. The game is derived from an ancient, similar one that used small knuckle bones.⁴

The Mechanical Dog weaves together the installation elements. The form began with a drawing that shows Blue leaping for the calf liver, and it went through several iterations. The mechanism that controlled the movement began with more complexity, but became simplified and more robust in order for visitors to activate it without breaking it. The Mechanical Dog also underwent scale modifications, becoming larger in order to underscore its importance. Its frame is painted the same color as the silhouettes of the

Dog, with a blue stripe around the Masonite dog form itself, in order to hint at returning to a life of color, and the idea that grief does abate, though loss never does.

Puppets as Objects

For a long time drawing and painting formed the core of my practice; however, I became attracted to working in three dimensions, as it is more tactile. As a 6-year-old at summer camp, I learned to use a heavy kick-wheel (which I forgot about until I returned to ceramics as an adult). The experience of working with such a plastic material as clay creates a physical, haptic connection that brings together mind and body. Taken directly from the earth, clay is the planet's flesh. It is malleable at the proper consistency, yet as it dries, it becomes a different medium with distinct properties, going from too-soft-to-hold-a-form, to bendable, to brittle, providing limitless object-making opportunities along that continuum.

A kinetic intelligence flows through the making of objects in clay, which is immediate and elicits a resonance in response. Clay remembers the imprint of my fingers and hands. Each bit of clay has its individual connection with gravity, with water, and changes through the relationship between the maker and the object. Through this making, identity evolves and the object emerges. The process of making objects and developing a relationship with them echoes the play relationships of childhood and brings together several ways of knowing. "We must...factor in the understanding that craft objects present experiences that more effectively balance, play with, or set in contradiction optic and haptic forms of perception than either paint-on-canvas art or non-craft sculpture," writes art critic John Perreault.⁵

There is a dynamic relationship between objects and mental action, says Sherry Turkle, sociology professor, author and editor. “Objects bring together thought and feeling Most objects exert their holding power because of the particular moment and circumstance in which they come into the author’s life ... other objects are naturally evocative because they remind us of the blurry childhood line between self and other – think of the stuffed bunny whose owner believes it can read her mind.”⁶ Contemporary artist Janine Antoni says that stories hide within objects.⁷ This concept has become a doorway to furthering my goal of connection without narrative, and which I will explore further in subsequent works in the future.

Objects, what’s more, mirror ourselves. Author and curator M. Anna Fariello postulates that an object transmits something of its origins when touched or held. “The best works capture the motivations of an individual life and, extending special circumstances and situations, translate these into a more universal language to reveal a collective human story.”⁸ “Regardless of scale, form or function, an object’s meaning is couched in a nonverbal language to be received and perceived both tactually and visually.”⁹ A shorthand for the transformative nature of objects are their purported alchemical or magical properties.

Puppets are a unique type of object. Puppets are concentrated forms. They are inanimate, but have animate potential. They are inhabitable. The hand-crafted, ceramic-headed puppets in the exhibition house various kinds of spirits: Susan, myself, the past, as well as feelings of connection, separation and grief. Puppets also reference childhood – the childhood shared by Susan and myself. As things of play, they are also ritual objects. Fariello writes, “The object serves as a marker, setting ritual action apart from

the ordinary ... the object possesses an uncanny ability to transform daily experience, as the maker originally transformed material.”¹⁰ Likewise, the Mechanical Dog fills this ritual role in the installation, in the way that, when activated, it moves visitors by their own volition into a different reality.

It was the hand puppet form that allowed me to bring together several strands: animal forms, ceramics, a connection with childhood, telling a story without relying on narrative; and alluding to the hand-body connection, underscoring my authorship of the installation. Additionally, puppets bring out responses and associations. Connected to the realm of toys and stuffed animals, they can be cute, but also, they are somehow prone to passionate action, often violence, in a way that other, relatable toys are not. Punch, the English Ur-puppet -- and his cousins from the Continent and beyond: Pulcinella (Italy) Polichinelle (France) Don Cristóbal (Spain) Petrushka (Russia) Karagiozis (Greece) and so on -- “are usually social underlings,” notes theater arts professor and author Eileen Blumenthal.¹¹ “Whatever their weapons of choice – broomstick, truncheon, frying pan—it is always at the ready. And while they attack authority figures with special gusto, they also are wont to assault friends and family.”¹² Yet Jim and Jane Henson’s *Muppets* upend that paradigm with more warm and cuddly puppets; even vampire Count Von Count seems kindly. Puppets have a functionality that may not be present in every other kind of toy. “What strikes me is the need for a made thing to tell a story, to become a vehicle for a voice, and impulse of character, something very old and very early.... All these connections help me take the measure of the puppet as a metaphor of human making – a form of life,” writes author Kenneth Gross.¹³ “It is the closest thing we have in the human world to the transmigration of the soul from one body to another, or from

one creature to another.”¹⁴ This open-ended flow of personalities, beings and emotions through the puppets’ bodies dovetails with my intentions to have the puppets reveal emotional states through their physical beings. Gross also talks about the puppet’s link to death. In Japan and Java, puppets were thought to provide a place for dead souls. They served as a means to repair a “loss of life, or to keep ancestral spirits alive, to give them a way to speak to the living.”¹⁵

I’ve chosen the hand puppet because it is the most intimate of the puppet forms. It is still, in its original incantation, connected to the body – by the hand -- in a way that marionettes are not. In that manner, the hand remains in control, which speaks to my intention as the Maker to be present, but hidden and disguised. The hand puppet has an actual person inside of it; Gross says the hand “becomes ensouling.”¹⁶ Though my puppets are not functioning as actual hand puppets in the installation, they do reference the connection between the hand – the Maker -- and the puppet. My puppets could be used, although I have purposely made them too large to be comfortable as functioning hand puppets, thereby asking viewers to question what exactly is their purpose.

In his essay *The ‘Uncanny’* Sigmund Freud explicates the particular feeling of fright associated with something quite familiar, but not totally understandable. In particular, he discusses the animatronic doll in the “Tales of Hoffmann.”¹⁷ That uncanny feeling also lurks in the puppet form. One never knows who or what may animate it. This idea of something familiar but strange informed my concept. Similarly, artist Paul Klee’s hand puppets he made for his son between 1916 and 1925 were particularly influential. Klee’s puppets approached the atmosphere I seek, their simple cloth bodies carrying these somewhat horrible beings within. “All convey Klee’s sense of theater as a

metaphysical thing, a place where hidden gestures of mind, will, or spirit are made visible ... a link back to the world of childhood play, volatile, metamorphic, dangerous, and often likely to survive into adulthood,” writes Gross.¹⁸

Purposefully having the puppets on and around pedestals invites the viewer to consider theatrical conventions as part of the installation. Theater, and particularly puppet shows, insist that viewers suspend disbelief and enter a different reality. The pedestals function as stages, or props, and the lights and shadows underscore the performance aspect of the work. Yet because the exhibition is a frozen moment in time, theatricality functions metaphorically, as an additional method of inviting the viewer to engage for a moment with loss, grief, and transformed time.

Investigations and Influences

As I worked through my ideas over the last three years I found inspiration and affirmation in the work of a key group of contemporary artists. Do Ho Suh's "348 West 22nd Street," (Fig. 1), which I saw for the first time on exhibit at the Miami-based Margulies Collection during my undergraduate days, gave me a sense of how loss can be visually portrayed. His use of fabric and the large size of the installation helped inform my own concepts about the use of space. My desire to evoke feelings of presence and absence through gesture was informed by the work of multimedia artist Janine Antoni and sculptor Nan Smith. A sense for the emotional expressiveness of fabric came from the work of Holy Smoke (Fig. 2), an English artist, who creates dog forms with burlap. Ceramic artist Beth Cavener Stichter's work with animal forms furthered my interest. Stichter says that her forms serve as vessels for human emotions in which she makes gestural decisions that "betray intent and motivation."¹⁹ Artist Mary Frank's visual investigations of gesture in clay provided ideas about psychological nuance.²⁰

Yet my afternoon-long discussion with sculptor and University of Miami artist Billie Grace Lynn exerted the most influence. I was able to share with her the experiences that inform my practice. Our discussion centered on how to open the world of play and puppets within object making; animal forms as metaphors; the relationship between the body and the spirit in art; how to communicate the moment when it seems like a presence leaves; and art objects that conjure the concept of transitions, from one state to another, with a focus on a liminal, or in-between state; and how to tempt an

audience to engage with work. These concepts and ideas are investigated in Temporal Displacement.

Conclusion

I want this project to create a separate space in which a memory is distilled into several related feelings and states of being: loss, grief, longing, and connection. Weaving these together through the objects, following the lead of the Mechanical Dog is the mechanism for how I invite viewers into this experiential installation. The process of creating the installation has pointed me toward a deeper investigation into transformative and magical objects through which the viewer's experience, and or awareness, is changed.

Going forward, I plan to make a fourth mold size, slightly smaller than the current heads, and further refine the body fabric and gestural options, in order to move closer to a toy-like, softer object without losing the sense of the large scale, which disrupts the traditional idea of the hand puppet. Using a different material to craft the bodies, including using armatures, might allow for a greater variety of position and gesture. Another avenue of exploration is the use of glaze on the terracotta ceramic, and how that might emphasize or echo the bodily gestures.

This work is relevant and timely because I investigate loss, grief and memory at a time when we, as a world, are facing global tragedies that have many people experiencing terrible circumstances, including the novel coronavirus, dislocation through war or climate change and personal violence. I hope that my work will give viewers a sense of

the transformations that can occur by revisiting memories and understanding those memories and states of being through objects and their emotional connections.

Figures



Figure 1. 348 West 22nd Street, Do Ho Suh., 2011-2015



Figure 2. Smoke 2, Holy Smoke, 2018



Figure 3. White Rabbit, Billie Grace Lynn, 2010

Plates



Plate 1. Inked ceramic stamp, 2019-2020



Plate 2. Juicer, terracotta, paper, ink, cart, dimensions variable 2018



Plate 3. Temporal Displacement, Installation view, mixed media, 2020



Plate 4. Temporal Displacement, Installation view, mixed media, 2020



Plate 5. Temporal Displacement, Detail, mixed media, 2020

Notes

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